



# The U.S. Military Academy Band

## *West Point, New York, presents*

### **Great Practice Equals Great Performance!**

*by Sergeant First Class Gregory W. Alley*

Everybody loves a great performance--audience and performers both! Would you agree that all musicians wish to be recognized as great performers? Can you prepare yourself for the spotlight of the performance hall in the solitude of the practice room? The answer is a resounding yes, but only if you plan your practice carefully!

First, you must accept that the quality of your performance will never exceed the quality of your practice. Oh, you may get lucky now and then, but you cannot depend on luck to bring you a great performance! You must plan for successes and not merely wish for them! Remember this: "Where the practice goes the performance follows!" It's just like the tail on the slinky dog. It always springs back, catching up to its head!

How can you make your practicing great? Here is a three-stage plan for preparing music such as an all-state solo, a competition, or even a recital.

**The first stage is the preparation stage.** Here, make it your goal to just get acquainted with the music and lay the best possible technical foundation upon which to later build. Ask the score questions. Make sure you know all the performance directives, such as *Allegro moderato con fuoco*, or *Cantabile con espressivo*, looking them up in a music dictionary if necessary. Research the background of the composer (the internet can be a helpful tool for this). Listen to recordings of the piece. Now is also the time to work out the demanding technical passages very carefully. Apply the "low and slow," style of practicing and carefully repeat passages until they become second nature. I believe that if you are really methodical and attend to as many details as possible at this point, the next stage becomes easier.

**The second stage is the precision stage.** Here, I like to think of a fine gold Rolex watch that is elegant and exact, attractive as well as accurate. In this stage you could also imagine that you are cutting the stones of artistry and polishing them into finished gems! This process takes time and effort and cannot be rushed. Furthermore, you'll never arrive at the third stage without first passing through this one first.

Employ all necessary tools to help you gain precision. The metronome will help your rhythmic precision and a tuner will help develop your sense of pitch. You might try setting the tuner to play a constant pitch while you tune various intervals over and under that pitch. This will get you listening carefully and I believe it is better than just looking at a needle or a set of LED lights. Other vital tools are the cassette or DAT tape recorders. Along with a good quality microphone, these help us determine if what we think we're hearing when we play is close to what is actually coming out. The new portable mini-disc recorders are also great for this purpose.

It is very important in this stage to go from asking questions of the score to actually making

statements through the music. As you get more technically precise, the poetry will start emerging and your concerns will naturally shift away from the technical mechanical aspects to the poetic, expressive ones. Like the Rolex, our music should be elegant and exact!

Approximately three weeks to one month before the performance you'll move into the **final stage**. I call this the **performance stage** because all that remains is to practice the performance! So, if I were playing a solo on July 11th, for example, I would aim to be completely ready to perform it around June 11th. In my opinion, this is so vitally imperative. There are several reasons for this. First, the music needs time to ripen and mature. Secondly, you need to use this time to continue practicing the particular fundamentals of your instrument such as scales and etudes. If you set these aside when preparing a solo, you will shoot yourself in the foot! Thirdly, you need to actually **practice the performance!**

How do you practice the performance? Practice your solo completely through from start to finish with no false starts! Practice not getting too upset over little mistakes but stay focused in spite of them. Practice walking off and on stage with confidence. Even practice on occasion at the same time of day as your performance, say, 8 o'clock p.m., and work through in advance any feelings of nervousness that crop up. Most importantly, just keep imagining a successful performance! In summary, practicing the performance means preparing yourself and the music as much as possible, while leaving enough time to gain the necessary confidence it takes to play greatly!

In all three phases, think precision, not perfection! You will never reach perfection, but you can reach precision! Keep asking yourself if you can make the music more precise. Give yourself time to learn and absorb the music and please be forgiving as you work through each phase. Finally, if you have fun while practicing and stay relaxed, your performances will be fun and you'll stay relaxed. Once you've made it through the final phase, you'll have a great history of preparation to lean upon as you step out of solitude and into the spotlight! You and the audience will enjoy the greatness of your performance and the ovations will follow!

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*This article provided courtesy of the [U.S. Military Academy Band](#) at West Point, New York*